Prestige - IMO And EC In High Level Talks

March 2003

IMO Secretary-General Mr. William O'Neill traveled to Brussels this week to meet the Vice-President of the European Commission, Mrs. Loyola de Palacio, to discuss action contemplated to be taken in the aftermath of the Prestige accident off the NW coast of Spain in November 2002.

Mr. O'Neill proposed that the focus of the meeting should be on:
- the measures which need to be taken to prevent recurrence of Prestige-type accidents (the outcome of the investigation into the casualty should be taken into account when these are being finalized);
- the need to have any such measures fully analysed and their implications (technical, legal and economic) thoroughly examined so that decisions could then be made against the background of an adequate global picture of the situation;
- the recognition that IMO is the correct forum to address issues stemming from the Prestige accident related to the elaboration and adoption of any regulatory measures affecting shipping engaged in international trade from the maritime safety and pollution prevention and control points of view required to remedy the situation, as had been done in previous cases; and
- the ways and means to introduce such measures at IMO so that they can be dealt with in the most expedient manner and also the steps which need to be taken next in order to give effect to any proposals which may be made regarding the Prestige incident.

Mr. O'Neill noted that the expeditious and successful way IMO acted on safety, environmental protection and liability and compensation proposals submitted in the aftermath of the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989 indicates that an equally prompt reaction to any proposals submitted by Governments to prevent Prestige or Prestige-type incidents recurring in the future would be assured.

Following the meeting both sides expressed satisfaction with the positive and constructive manner and outcome of their consultations concerning the objectives to be achieved in the aftermath of the Prestige accident.

Emphasizing the need for shipping to continue to be regulated by global standards, while, at the same time, recognizing the actions, the role and the responsibilities of the European Union, in particular the actions required to be undertaken in the context of the Prestige for a better coastal protection, the two parties concurred that the opportunity should be seized, as soon as possible, for IMO to further enhance the prevention of pollution from tankers at the world-wide level.

Revisions to MARPOL

Mrs. de Palacio stated that, having regard to the obligations under the European Treaty and the role of the European Commission within the European Union and taking account of the decisions already taken by the European Parliament and EU Council of Ministers, as soon as the EU Institutions have formulated their position in response to the Prestige accident, appropriate measures would be proposed to IMO by the EU to revise the MARPOL Convention with respect to the regulations related to the phasing-out of single hull tankers and to prohibit the carriage of dirty oils by single hull tankers. It might be expected that both the Council and the European Parliament will succeed in finalizing their position by the end of March. Mr. O'Neill welcomed this statement and outlined an expeditious way to handle the EU proposals once submitted to IMO for consideration. The desirability of a global approach to the single hull tanker issue was recognized.

Tankers - Detection of Structural Weakness

Both parties also agreed on the need for proactive action for the detection of structural weaknesses in ageing oil tankers, both single and double hulled.

PSSA Measures

In the meantime, the importance of designating new particularly sensitive sea areas and identifying places of refuge was stressed. The initiative taken by EU Member States to have additional PSSA measures considered at IMO's forthcoming MEPC session in July was welcomed and supported.

Places of Refuge

With regard to places of refuge, the European Commission welcomed the initiatives already taken by IMO towards adopting appropriate guidelines and underlined the importance of using these guidelines when implementing measures related to places of refuge throughout the EU.

The Role of the Flag State

Both sides emphasized the need to enhance flag State performance globally through IMO. Given the commitment of the EU Member States towards flag State auditing, the importance of achieving substantial progress on flag State performance at forthcoming IMO meetings (MSC, Council and Assembly) was recognized.

Future Relationship between IMO and EC

During the discussion, the European Commission stressed the added value the EU is bringing to IMO's work and how the relationship between IMO and the EU could be strengthened. The European Commission referred to its proposal for obtaining an early EU membership at IMO, which it considers will offer it the opportunity to play an even more constructive role within the Organization.

IMO - the International Maritime Organization - is the United Nations Specialized Agency with responsibility for the safety of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships. Web site: www.imo.org
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